

Councillor Gary Taylor

Isle of Wight Councillor for Ryde South

Members Room
County Hall
High Street
Newport
Isle of Wight PO30 1UD

Email gary.taylor@iow.gov.uk
Tel (01983) 821000
Fax (01983) 823677
DX 56361 Newport (Isle of Wight)
Web iwight.com

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Dear Davina

Re: Complaint against Councillor Welsford

As you will be aware, the above councillor raised the tragic circumstances of a child's death on the Island last year, at a meeting of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel on Tuesday the 5th of February. I was chairing this meeting in the absence of Cllr George Cameron.

In raising this circumstance, he also gave what he believed to be the exact date of death of the child concerned, thus allowing this sensitive information – including the date – to be reported in the media via a tweet (On the Wight) and also the following day on the websites of the County Press and 'On the Wight'. Such an action could clearly have led to the family concerned experiencing significant distress at the public disclosure of the date of their child's death (given that this level of detail could have allowed the name of the child to be identified) and thereby caused them unimaginable anguish at this already acutely difficult time in their lives. For this reason, I understand that the County Press and 'On the Wight' removed the precise date from their reports (at the request of the Council), a step which demonstrates just how inappropriate and reckless the initial disclosure by Cllr Welsford was.

In chairing this meeting, I reacted swiftly to ensure that no further discussion took place on this sensitive matter, but the damage (i.e. public disclosure) had already been done – although the Chief Executive and Strategic Director made sensible and cautious statements in response, to seek to mitigate the potential damage which Cllr Welsford had caused. I was extremely concerned at his conduct in this matter, which is why I now feel it is necessary to bring these matters formally to your attention. I write in both my councillor (and corporate parent) role, but also as an education professional who has many years of training and experience in handling sensitive child-related matters. In my professional world, such an improper disclosure would have led to a teacher being subject to serious disciplinary action and likely dismissal from service, including being removed from membership of the General Teaching Council. Being a corporate parent is, in my view, of a similar level of formal responsibility as working in the education sector.

As it turns out, the date Cllr Welsford gave was wholly incorrect, but that does not detract from the fact that had it been correct (which presumably was the assumption on which Cllr Welsford made the claim), then the serious and damaging impact could have been considerable.

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You will understand that Councillor Welsford raised this issue during agenda item 5 which was a discussion surrounding the findings of the Ofsted report on Children's Safeguarding. In making this link, he clearly implied that the parents concerned were subject to child protection monitoring, which, whether that were the case or not, would have also caused them significant distress at seeing their child's death linked to the shortcomings in practice identified in the Ofsted report. If he had behaved in a proper and responsible fashion, he would have approached the lead member or director discreetly and voiced his concerns outside of a public forum, rather than cynically and shamefully using a child's death to make political capital. Although it now transpires that his stated date was incorrect, by giving the age of death (11 weeks) and a possible date there was still the potential for the family to recognise their circumstances in the resulting media reports.

My reasons for writing are to assert that the Member's Code of Conduct was breached by Councillor Welsford in the following sections:

4. You must not—

(a) disclose information given to you in confidence by anyone, or information acquired by you which you believe, or ought reasonably to be aware, is of a confidential nature, except where—

(i) you have the consent of a person authorised to give it;

(ii) you are required by law to do so;

(iii) the disclosure is made to a third party for the purpose of obtaining professional advice provided that the third party agrees not to disclose the information to any other person; or

(iv) the disclosure is—

1. reasonable and in the public interest; and

2. made in good faith and in compliance with the reasonable requirements of the authority; or

(b) prevent another person from gaining access to information to which that person is entitled by law.

5. You must not conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or the Isle of Wight Council into disrepute.

I also believe that Cllr Welsford's conduct breached the spirit of the Protocol for Councillors on Rights to Information, as contained in the Council's Constitution. It is worth noting that this protocol makes clear that *"any member of the Council may request a briefing on a specific issue from a Director or appropriate Head of Service"*. This confirms what I have outlined further above that Cllr Welsford could have sought a briefing / clarification on such matters from the relevant director, rather than just deliberately blurting this sensitive detail straight out into a public forum with potentially damaging consequences.

It cannot have been in the public interest to raise the specific circumstances of an individual child's death during a public discussion into the IW Council's inadequate safeguarding arrangements, and to disclose information, such as a date of death, which may well cause untold damage to the long term wellbeing of a struggling family in mourning. As members we have a responsibility to exercise

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caution when handling sensitive information, and, as corporate parents, we have a duty to seek the best outcomes for our looked after children, as we would wish for our own.

If the child concerned had been in our care, would we, as good corporate parents, have wished these tragic circumstances to have been referred to publically, in such specific detail, in the context of an inadequate Ofsted report? I am not sure whether there is a mechanism by which the privilege of being a corporate parent can be removed, but feel strongly that such a sanction should really apply in this case, given the obvious sensitivities involved. I certainly feel that this would be a necessary precautionary measure whilst these matters are investigated, and steps should be taken to ensure that Councillor Welsford does not have continued access to confidential and sensitive information during this time – or until such time that he can demonstrate an ability to deal with such information in an appropriate and mature manner.

Given all of the above, I believe that Councillor Welsford has brought his office into disrepute by exploiting the death of a child in what can only be described as a crude and cynical media-focused stunt. His principal interest appears to be one of scoring a cheap political point in response to an undoubtedly well-intentioned, but unfortunate, remark made by Cllr Abraham a couple of weeks ago.

I would please ask that, as monitoring officer, you investigate this matter, and take appropriate action if necessary, in order that the standards of our public life on the Island are kept at a level we would all expect – and in particular that the confidence that the public should rightly have in all 40 members being able to handle sensitive and confidential information appropriately is not in any way diminished.

In the interests of transparency I am copying this note to Cllr Welsford himself and also to Cllr Ian Stephens, his Group Leader, to inform him of the conduct issues relating to one of his members. Cllr Stephens may wish to consider whether any steps need to be taken in relation to Cllr Welsford's continued membership of the Independent Group whilst these matters are under investigation.

Kind regards

Gary

Councillor *Gary Taylor*
Councillor for Ryde South